



THE IMPORTANCE OF REALISM IN ILLUSTRATIONS FOR CHILDREN

—MANJULA PADMANABHAN*

Many years ago, I saw a hoarding advertising a brand of chocolate. Its caption read, "The Goodness of Milk in Every Block!" And its visual showed the silhouette of a cow rendered in chocolate blocks.

I must have passed this hoarding several times before a sudden realization struck me: though I could only see the outline of a cow, I recognized that it was not an Indian cow. It was low-slung and stocky, it had short horns, it may even have had a bell—I do not remember that detail. What matters is, it was not the silhouette of a typical Indian cow. In this country of cow-worshippers, the advertisers had pre-

ferred to represent "The Goodness of Milk" with the outline of a foreign cow!

I realized, of course, that several factors must have contributed to the choice of such a visual. Perhaps it was just a copy of a foreign advertisement for the same product. Perhaps there was a conscious intention to suggest that the chocolate was indeed a foreign product. And then again, the silhouette of an Indian cow may have offended those who consider the cow a sacred animal.

But apart from all these reasons, the real reason was probably more fundamental and more unconscious. The advertisement was

*Ms Manjula Padmanabhan is many-faceted artist who writes, illustrates and photographs. She is at present working with Living Media India, Ltd. She has contributed articles to the Times of India Sunday magazine and designed the covers for Science Today and Femina. Besides illustrating for Thomson Press, India Book House, Orient Longmans and National Book Trust. Her play Light Out Theatre and animated films.

aimed at middle-class, English-speaking buyers. It had probably been put together by similarly middle-class, English-speaking copy-writers. This group of people is reasonably affluent, quite Westernized and most probably grew up with picture-books of Western farm-yard animals. To them, as much as to me, the outline of an English cow was so familiar and ordinary as to seem the only obvious visual symbol for the word "cow." Though we are surrounded by cows wandering in our streets, the abstract notion of a cow was apparently better suggested by an animal not generally seen on our streets!

This incident led me to understand that for many literate people, the first images seen in books become part of a subconscious "visual dictionary," which probably remain with them for the rest of their lives, connects words with instant mental images. What I realized from that chocolate block cow was that these mental images, though formed in early childhood, can have such powerful resonance that they can sometimes be even more evocative than reality itself.

Perhaps one reason that I personally became sharply aware of the difference between the mental images of things and the things themselves, was the difficulty I used to have—and still have—when drawing ordinary objects like bicycles, teacups, houses and cars. On the one hand, I was constantly being told that my drawings were not "Indian" enough. On the other hand, I began to realize that whenever I thought of something before I started to draw, the first picture which appeared in my head would seem perfectly clear and precise, but when I looked around to check my reference, I would realize that the real object was quite different. When I checked back to the mental image which had first appeared in my head, I would realize that yet again, I had taken my reference from

the memory of some book or magazine seen in early childhood, nearly always a foreign publication.

This is what brings me to the subject of this paper. I feel, from my experience as an illustrator and from looking at the work of many other artists, that the pictures a child sees in its earliest visual reference books have profound effect on its ability to relate words to the reality outside books, perhaps for the whole of that person's life.

The ability to see the world is not casual, it is not merely a question of opening one's eyes to have the world pop into view, full-formed with names, dates and serial numbers. A complex and little-understood network of associations takes place whenever the eye registers an image. For some people, the picture of a rose would immediately suggest a particular scent, for others, it would suggest a romantic occasion, for some others it would suggest a botany lesson. For people who have never seen or heard of roses, the picture of roses would have no associations at all. It would be for them just another flower. For people who have never seen or thought of any flowers, the picture of a rose—or even a rose itself—would be completely meaningless. In order to recognize something, a person must have some notion of its existence in advance.

The process by which visual information is reassembled in the mind to form words and associations starts from the first moment of sight. It does not stop with maturity: adults go on adding to their stock of visual information all through their lives. But for children, the cement on the sidewalk of memory is not only wetter and more impressionable, it also has much more blank space available. The picture books that a child is exposed to at an early age stamp deep images into that mental cement, images which are quite difficult to erase or to add to later on.

There are two levels at which I use the term "realistic images."

One is the level I have referred to before, relating to images seen in early childhood from foreign books which leave indelible impressions of a foreign-looking reality in the mind.

The other level is the relationship between a drawing and the subject of the drawing. In one sense, of course, a photograph relates more closely to its subject than any drawing can. Yet a photograph has many drawbacks, especially as a form of illustration for children's books. For instance, a photograph of a monkey cannot but include the tree on which the monkey sits, the leaves, the sky and whatever else fits into the frame of the photograph. An artist, by contrast, can choose the amount of detail to include, concentrating just on the monkey or showing the monkey in whatever pose is relevant.

How much detail an artist chooses to include in a drawing depends in part on the artist's ability and style, but should also depend on the context. In books for children, realism needs to include an understanding of what is appropriate to the particular situation, to the particular book. An artist who draws exquisitely realistic paintings of monkeys would be the wrong choice for a light-hearted story about a monkey character. The challenge in such a situation would lie in drawing a monkey realistically enough that a child would be able to recognize it as monkey, and be able to relate it to all other members of its class of creatures.

The degree of accuracy to be aimed at in drawings for children is a delicate issue. I do not believe it is possible to lay down rigid criteria. Different artists have different skills and art itself is only a sort of two-dimensional shorthand for the restless continuum of real life. Nevertheless, I

think it is possible to assess the skills of individual artists. The simplest method is to compare the artist's shorthand version of the world with one's own experiences, or the experiences of others. Needless to say, this means that one must feel confident that one's own awareness of reality is high enough to make a fair assessment!

Then there is the question of style. Many artists like to use the excuse of style as the reason they avoid matching their shorthand for reality with the reality of others around them. Personally, I think of style as a luxury which an artist should afford only after she or he has gained some mastery over the perception of reality. Otherwise, style is just a meaningless crutch. I think it is very important for the editors of children's books to be sure of the distinction between those artists who can choose to make stylized drawings and those whose work is stylized out of incompetence or ignorance.

It is important for artists to realize that when they draw for children, they are not merely satisfying their own creative urges but are entering the process of educating young minds.

I think of the conventions of realistic drawing as a form of telling the truth. The visual truth of parallel lines which converge towards the horizon is to me no different from the truth that the earth is round or that two and two make four. When children grow up with the visual truth of converging parallel lines, they are, in my opinion, better able to appreciate, later on, the paradox that parallel lines never meet. After all, if a person has never noticed the illusion of converging parallel lines, in what context does one teach the idea that the lines never meet?

Many people interpret an insistence on realism as being a descent to a prosaic realm of stuffy and unimaginative drawings. I, on the contrary, feel that it is dif-

difficult to achieve a high level of fantasy, sophisticated, whimsical or unless one's perception of reality is already sound. Just as it is difficult to tell a lie unless one already knows what reality looks like.

The pictures that children see in their

earliest books are like the alphabets of a language of vision. I believe that if the alphabet with which they are taught to see is clear, vivid and lively, they will grow up to see the world with fluency, imagination and clarity.